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Banishing the Ghost of Elections Past?

Professor John Curtice reviews the performance of the pollsters during the recent election campaign.

The reputation of the polling industry rests heavily on how closely polls conducted in the last day or two of a general election campaign anticipate the eventual result. If collectively the industry's methods are unbiased, the average vote share for each party across all such 'final' polls should more or less match the outcome, while the number of polls that under-estimate a particular party's eventual vote share should be matched by a similar number that suffer from an over-estimation.

At recent elections, however, the polling industry has struggled to pass this test. In 1992 it suffered one of its biggest ever embarrassments; on average the final polls suggested that Labour held a one point lead over the Conservatives when in the event they proved to be eight points behind. And while the record has not been as bad at any other recent election, between 1987 and 2005 only one final poll underestimated Labour's strength as compared with the Conservatives, while another one anticipated the two parties' vote shares exactly. Every other 'final' poll overestimated Labour's strength vis-à-vis the Conservatives – a sure sign it would seem of a pro-Labour bias.

Not that the industry has sat back complacently on its laurels during this time. It has in truth undergone a revolution. In 1987 all polling was conducted face to face using quota sampling; now nearly all takes place over the phone or – increasingly – the internet. Irrespective of mode there has been a growing appreciation of the need to guard against and overcome unrepresentative samples, differential propensity to turnout, and differential item refusal to questions about voting intention. As a result no published set of poll figures these days is a simple statement of the proportion of the achieved sample that said they would vote for each party; instead it is the product of weighting and adjustment procedures that can have a substantial impact on the final figures.

So a key question for the polling industry in 2010 was whether the further round of adjustments to its procedures and practices undertaken during the last five years had finally managed to overcome the apparent pro-Labour bias. It seems as though they have done. However, at the same time, 2010 raised a new question mark about the accuracy of the polls.

No less than nine companies conducted Britain-wide polls wholly or mostly during the final three days of the campaign. Between them they still underestimated the Conservatives – an average figure of 36% was one point less than the Tories’ actually tally of 37%. However, they underestimated Labour even more – by two points. Although two polls still underestimated the Conservatives’ lead over Labour, one poll was spot on while no less than five managed to overestimate the Conservatives’ position vis-à-vis Labour. The ghost of 1992 seems finally to have been laid to rest.

But, of course, if the polls were underestimating both the Conservatives and Labour, they must have been overestimating someone else. And that party was the Liberal Democrats. On average the final polls suggested that Nick Clegg’s party was on 27% of the vote, when in the event the party only managed to secure 24%. Not a single poll underestimated the Liberal Democrat tally.

This discrepancy came as a considerable shock on election night. After all, much of the election campaign had been dominated by an apparent surge in Liberal Democrat support that had been identified by the polls in the wake of the first of the UK party leaders’ debates.

Yet when the ballot boxes were opened, it seemed that the surge might have been little more than a mirage.

So we can expect inquests in the coming months into what happened to the Liberal Democrat ‘surge’. The polls had detected a gradual decline in Liberal Democrat support during the last two weeks of the campaign – and perhaps this turned into a ‘late swing’ away from the party in the final hours of the election. Or perhaps in weighting and adjusting their polls to overcome the pro-Labour bias, the pollsters have fallen into a new methodological trap? We shall have to await and see.

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Professor John Curtice will be presenting ‘The Uses (and Abuses) of Regression’ at an AQMeN lecture at University of Strathclyde on 10th August 2010. [Further Details and Registration.](#)

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